



## **"Critical Democratic Citizenship": What competencies do students need to engage for justice in a diverse democracy?**

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### **Summary**

Higher education institutions are increasingly committing to graduating students who are dedicated to civic engagement for the public good (AACU, 2008; Furco & Goss, 2001; Musil, 2011). If these students are to become citizens who take positive actions for racial and social justice, they need to understand the myriad ways in which people from diverse backgrounds are impacted by laws, policies, and cultural practices. In this paper, I argue higher education institutions should be educating students to become citizens who engage at the local-, state- or national-level with an orientation towards racial justice. These students determine how and where to participate through openly and actively thinking about multiple and diverse perspectives to determine the often complex structural causes of individual

situations and behaviors. I call the integration of these learning outcomes “*critical democratic citizenship*.”

A functioning democracy relies on citizen participation (Dewey, 1916). Participation can and should be broadly constructed (Haste, 2009; Haste & Hogan, 2006; Mira, 2010) to include involvement or actions in collective community-based efforts; in local, state, and national issues; and for the general betterment of one’s communities (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). But how and in what ways citizens participate matters. Determining how to *participate* in ways that promote *justice* is a complex undertaking with a range of possible civic actions. In a society plagued by multiple racial/ethnic inequities, we need citizens actively supporting racial justice (Warren, 2010). To participate in civic actions which support racial justice, three additional overlapping competencies are important: *openness to multiple perspectives, active thinking, and structural thinking about racial inequality*.

Together, these skills—participation, justice-orientation, openness to multiple perspectives, active thinking, and structural thinking about racial inequality—make up *critical democratic citizenship*. I argue that because racial/ethnic inequalities have multiple and complex causes, and because people tend to overestimate the internal causes of situations/behaviors, critical democratic citizenship is necessary for developing effective strategies for deconstructing systemic inequities and realizing the ideal of a just democratic nation.

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